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Dr. Smits holds a PhD in economic history. He was formally affiliated to Groningen University and was vice-president of the Groningen Growth and Development Centre (GGDC). He was part of the advisory body of a project on "Historical Roots of the Dutch Sustainability Challenge: The impact of the Utilization of Material Resources on the Modernization of Dutch Society, 1850-2010". Dr. Smits shared the post of chair/editor of the UNECE/OECD/Eurostat Task Force for Measuring Sustainable Development (TFSD).

Currently he is the representative of Statistics Netherlands in the IAEG-SDG.